UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT WESTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN NORTHERN DIVISION

DAVID ADAMS,

Plaintiff,

Case No. 2:23-cv-218

v.

Hon. Hala Y. Jarbou

PATRICIA LEWIS, et al.,

Defendants.

OPINION

This is a civil rights action brought by a state prisoner under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Under the Prison Litigation Reform Act, Pub. L. No. 104-134, 110 Stat. 1321 (1996) (PLRA), the Court is required to dismiss any prisoner action brought under federal law if the complaint is frivolous, malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief can be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2), 1915A; 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). The Court must read Plaintiff's *pro se* complaint indulgently, *see Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972), and accept Plaintiff's allegations as true, unless they are clearly irrational or wholly incredible. *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25, 33 (1992). Applying these standards, the Court will dismiss Plaintiff's complaint for failure to state a claim against Defendants Dums and Unknown Part(y)(ies). The Court will serve the complaint against Defendant Lewis.

Discussion

I. Factual Allegations

Plaintiff is presently incarcerated with the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) at the Baraga Correctional Facility (AMF) in Baraga, Baraga County, Michigan. The events of

which Plaintiff complains occurred there. Plaintiff sues Medical Practitioner Patricia Lewis in her official and personal capacities. Plaintiff also sues Defendants AMF Acting Assistant Deputy Warden Chester Dums and Unknown Part(y)(ies) named as Lawyers of AMF Legal Writer Program. (ECF No. 1, PageID.2.)

Plaintiff claims that Defendant Lewis is refusing to treat his unspecified "substantial pains." (*Id.* at PageID.4.) Plaintiff asserts that his "substantial pains" constitute a serious medical need and that Defendant Lewis has been deliberately indifferent to Plaintiff's need for treatment. (*Id.*) Plaintiff also claims that Defendants Unknown Part(y)(ies) violated his rights by refusing to provide him assistance with filing a lawsuit against Defendant Lewis. (*Id.* at PageID.3–4.)

Plaintiff attaches a copy of a letter dated October 30, 2023, from the legal writer program to Plaintiff stating:

Your request for assistance for filing a lawsuit against Nurse Practitioner Patricia Lewis, denying you pain medications for your claim of internal burning pain in your body, has been denied. You stated that the internal burning is not just a heartburn issue, but it is an injury being caused by the weaponization of contaminated food.

Your request for assistance for filing this 1983, boils down to a disagreement between you and the medical provider. Unless you have some serious (medical official) contradicting Lewis's decision, you have no claim.

(ECF No. 1-1, PageID.10 (emphasis omitted).)

Plaintiff also attaches a health care request dated August 14, 2023, in which he complains of burning and itching which was "seriously affecting [his] nerves." (*Id.*, PageID.14.) On September 10, 2023, Plaintiff kited that he had pains of "sharp burn and or itch; these pains are affecting my nerves too! Shingrix or TIDL or Salonpas will relieve these pains that I suffer???" (*Id.*, PageID.15.) The response indicated that a chart review had been scheduled. (*Id.*)

On October 14, 2023, Plaintiff submitted a health care request indicating that he was suffering from burning and itching in his "muscles, skin, [and] nerves." (*Id.*, PageID.16.) Plaintiff

received a kite response on October 26, 2023, which noted that Plaintiff was complaining that the pain he was suffering from the food was also affecting his nerves and that he was seeking "cortisone w/nervive or therauiorx nerve relief or their equals." (*Id.*, PageID.17.) The response indicated that Plaintiff had been scheduled to see a nurse. (*Id.*)

On October 28, 2023, Plaintiff submitted a health care request, which asserted that he was following up about "substantial pain caused by the food." (*Id.*, PageID.18.) Plaintiff again requested medications: "cortisone w/nervive or therauiorx nerve relief" or the equivalent. (*Id.*) Plaintiff also complained of the failure to notify "Well Path Leadership" of his medical kites. (*Id.*)

Plaintiff seeks an order requiring Defendant Lewis to provide him with treatment for his pain and compensatory and punitive damages.

II. Failure to State a Claim

A complaint may be dismissed for failure to state a claim if it fails "to give the defendant fair notice of what the . . . claim is and the grounds upon which it rests." *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007) (quoting *Conley v. Gibson*, 355 U.S. 41, 47 (1957)). While a complaint need not contain detailed factual allegations, a plaintiff's allegations must include more than labels and conclusions. *Id.*; *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) ("Threadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice."). The court must determine whether the complaint contains "enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face." *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 570. "A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged." *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679. Although the plausibility standard is not equivalent to a "'probability requirement,' . . . it asks for more than a sheer possibility that a defendant has acted unlawfully." *Id.* at 678 (quoting *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 556). "[W]here the well-pleaded facts do not permit the court to infer more than the mere possibility of

misconduct, the complaint has alleged—but it has not 'show[n]'—that the pleader is entitled to relief." *Id.* at 679 (quoting Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2)); *see also Hill v. Lappin*, 630 F.3d 468, 470–71 (6th Cir. 2010) (holding that the *Twombly/Iqbal* plausibility standard applies to dismissals of prisoner cases on initial review under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915A(b)(1) and 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii)).

To state a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege the violation of a right secured by the federal Constitution or laws and must show that the deprivation was committed by a person acting under color of state law. West v. Atkins, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988); Street v. Corr. Corp. of Am., 102 F.3d 810, 814 (6th Cir. 1996). Because § 1983 is a method for vindicating federal rights, not a source of substantive rights itself, the first step in an action under § 1983 is to identify the specific constitutional right allegedly infringed. Albright v. Oliver, 510 U.S. 266, 271 (1994).

A. Eighth Amendment

Plaintiff alleges that Defendant Lewis refused to treat his "substantial pains" in violation of the Eighth Amendment. The Eighth Amendment prohibits the infliction of cruel and unusual punishment against those convicted of crimes. U.S. Const. amend. VIII. The Eighth Amendment obligates prison authorities to provide medical care to incarcerated individuals, as a failure to provide such care would be inconsistent with contemporary standards of decency. *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97, 103–04 (1976). The Eighth Amendment is violated when a prison official is deliberately indifferent to the serious medical needs of a prisoner. *Id.* at 104–05; *Comstock v. McCrary*, 273 F.3d 693, 702 (6th Cir. 2001).

Deliberate indifference may be manifested by a doctor's failure to respond to the medical needs of a prisoner, or by "prison guards in intentionally denying or delaying access to medical care or intentionally interfering with the treatment once prescribed. Regardless of how evidenced,

deliberate indifference to a prisoner's serious illness or injury states a cause of action under § 1983." *Estelle*, 429 U.S. at 104–05.

A claim for the deprivation of adequate medical care has an objective and a subjective component. Farmer v. Brennan, 511 U.S. 825, 834 (1994). To satisfy the objective component, the plaintiff must allege that the medical need at issue is sufficiently serious. *Id.* In other words, the inmate must show that he is incarcerated under conditions posing a substantial risk of serious harm. Id. The objective component of the adequate medical care test is satisfied "[w]here the seriousness of a prisoner's need[] for medical care is obvious even to a lay person." Blackmore v. Kalamazoo Cnty., 390 F.3d 890, 899 (6th Cir. 2004); see also Phillips v. Roane Cnty., 534 F.3d 531, 539–40 (6th Cir. 2008). Obviousness, however, is not strictly limited to what is detectable to the eye. Even if the layman cannot see the medical need, a condition may be obviously medically serious where a layman, if informed of the true medical situation, would deem the need for medical attention clear. See, e.g., Rouster v. Saginaw Cnty., 749 F.3d 437, 446-51 (6th Cir. 2014) (holding that a prisoner who died from a perforated duodenum exhibited an "objectively serious need for medical treatment," even though his symptoms appeared to the medical staff at the time to be consistent with alcohol withdrawal); Johnson v. Karnes, 398 F.3d 868, 874 (6th Cir. 2005) (holding that prisoner's severed tendon was a "quite obvious" medical need, since "any lay person would realize to be serious," even though the condition was not visually obvious). If the plaintiff's claim, however, is based on "the prison's failure to treat a condition adequately, or where the prisoner's affliction is seemingly minor or non-obvious," Blackmore, 390 F.3d at 898, the plaintiff must "place verifying medical evidence in the record to establish the detrimental effect of the delay in medical treatment," Napier v. Madison Cnty., 238 F.3d 739, 742 (6th Cir. 2001) (internal quotation marks omitted).

The subjective component requires an inmate to show that prison officials have "a sufficiently culpable state of mind" in denying medical care. *Brown v. Bargery*, 207 F.3d 863, 867 (6th Cir. 2000). Deliberate indifference "entails something more than mere negligence," but can be "satisfied by something less than acts or omissions for the very purpose of causing harm or with knowledge that harm will result." *Farmer*, 511 U.S. at 835. "[T]he official must both be aware of facts from which the inference could be drawn that a substantial risk of serious harm exists, and he must also draw the inference." *Id.* at 837. To prove a defendant's subjective knowledge, "[a] plaintiff may rely on circumstantial evidence . . . : A jury is entitled to 'conclude that a prison official knew of a substantial risk from the very fact that the risk was obvious.'" *Rhinehart v. Scutt*, 894 F.3d 721, 738 (6th Cir. 2018) (quoting *Farmer*, 511 U.S. at 842)).

However, not every claim by a prisoner that he has received inadequate medical treatment states a violation of the Eighth Amendment. *Estelle*, 429 U.S. at 105. As the Supreme Court explained:

[A]n inadvertent failure to provide adequate medical care cannot be said to constitute an unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain or to be repugnant to the conscience of mankind. Thus, a complaint that a physician has been negligent in diagnosing or treating a medical condition does not state a valid claim of medical mistreatment under the Eighth Amendment. Medical malpractice does not become a constitutional violation merely because the victim is a prisoner. In order to state a cognizable claim, a prisoner must allege acts or omissions sufficiently harmful to evidence deliberate indifference to serious medical needs.

Id. at 105–06 (quotations omitted). Thus, differences in judgment between an inmate and prison medical personnel regarding the appropriate medical diagnoses or treatment are not enough to state a deliberate indifference claim. *Darrah v. Krisher*, 865 F.3d 361, 372 (6th Cir. 2017); *Briggs v. Westcomb*, 801 F. App'x 956, 959 (6th Cir. 2020); *Mitchell v. Hininger*, 553 F. App'x 602, 605 (2014). This is so even if the misdiagnosis results in an inadequate course of treatment and

considerable suffering. *Gabehart v. Chapleau*, No. 96-5050, 1997 WL 160322, at *2 (6th Cir. Apr. 4, 1997).

The Sixth Circuit distinguishes "between cases where the complaint alleges a complete denial of medical care and those cases where the claim is that a prisoner received inadequate medical treatment." Westlake v. Lucas, 537 F.2d 857, 860 n.5 (6th Cir. 1976). If "a prisoner has received some medical attention and the dispute is over the adequacy of the treatment, federal courts are generally reluctant to second guess medical judgments and to constitutionalize claims which sound in state tort law." Id.; see also Rouster, 749 F.3d at 448; Perez v. Oakland Cnty., 466 F.3d 416, 434 (6th Cir. 2006); *Kellerman v. Simpson*, 258 F. App'x 720, 727 (6th Cir. 2007); McFarland v. Austin, 196 F. App'x 410 (6th Cir. 2006); Edmonds v. Horton, 113 F. App'x 62, 65 (6th Cir. 2004); Brock v. Crall, 8 F. App'x 439, 440–41 (6th Cir. 2001); Berryman v. Rieger, 150 F.3d 561, 566 (6th Cir. 1998). "Where the claimant received treatment for his condition, as here, he must show that his treatment was 'so woefully inadequate as to amount to no treatment at all." Mitchell, 553 F. App'x at 605 (quoting Alspaugh v. McConnell, 643 F.3d 162, 169 (6th Cir. 2011)). He must demonstrate that the care he received was "so grossly incompetent, inadequate, or excessive as to shock the conscience or to be intolerable to fundamental fairness." See Miller v. Calhoun Cnty., 408 F.3d 803, 819 (6th Cir. 2005) (quoting Waldrop v. Evans, 871 F.2d 1030, 1033 (11th Cir. 1989)).

As noted above, Plaintiff's complaint is largely conclusory. Plaintiff seeks treatment for unspecified pain and itching that he claims is related to contaminated food in the prison. Plaintiff states that he has repeatedly requested specific treatments that he believes would be effective in treating his pain and asserts that Defendant Lewis is continuing to deny these treatments. However, Plaintiff fails to allege facts detailing the duration, specific nature, or circumstances surrounding

the occurrences of pain. Moreover, Plaintiff does not allege that he has not been seen or examined by Defendant Lewis or other medical professionals, merely that he has not been given any medication to address his symptoms. Although this appears to be a close question, construing Plaintiff's complaint in the most favorable light, he appears to be asserting a complete denial of treatment for complaints of pain that began in August of 2023. Therefore, it appears that based on the current record, Plaintiff has stated an Eighth Amendment claim against Defendant Lewis.

B. Access to courts

Plaintiff appears to be asserting that Defendant Unknown Part(y)(ies) violated his First Amendment rights by refusing to provide him with legal writer assistance in filing this claim. It is well established that prisoners have a constitutional right of access to the courts. *Bounds v. Smith*, 430 U.S. 817, 821 (1977). The principal issue in *Bounds* was whether the states must protect the right of access to the courts by providing law libraries or alternative sources of legal information for prisoners. *Id.* at 817. The Court further noted that in addition to law libraries or alternative sources of legal knowledge, the states must provide indigent inmates with "paper and pen to draft legal documents, notarial services to authenticate them, and with stamps to mail them." *Id.* at 824–25. The right of access to the courts also prohibits prison officials from erecting barriers that may impede the inmate's access to the courts. *See Knop v. Johnson*, 977 F.2d 996, 1009 (6th Cir. 1992).

An indigent prisoner's constitutional right to legal resources and materials is not, however, without limit. In order to state a viable claim for interference with his access to the courts, a plaintiff must show "actual injury." *Lewis v. Casey*, 518 U.S. 343, 349 (1996); *see also Talley-Bey v. Knebl*, 168 F.3d 884, 886 (6th Cir. 1999); *Knop*, 977 F.2d at 1000. In other words, a plaintiff must plead and demonstrate that the shortcomings in the prison legal assistance program or lack of legal materials have hindered, or are presently hindering, his efforts to pursue a nonfrivolous legal claim. *Lewis*, 518 U.S. at 351–53; *see also Pilgrim v. Littlefield*, 92 F.3d 413, 416 (6th Cir.

1996). The Supreme Court has strictly limited the types of cases for which there may be an actual injury:

Bounds does not guarantee inmates the wherewithal to transform themselves into litigating engines capable of filing everything from shareholder derivative actions to slip-and-fall claims. The tools it requires to be provided are those that the inmates need in order to attack their sentences, directly or collaterally, and in order to challenge the conditions of their confinement. Impairment of any other litigating capacity is simply one of the incidental (and perfectly constitutional) consequences of conviction and incarceration.

Lewis, 518 U.S. at 355. "Thus, a prisoner's right to access the courts extends to direct appeals, habeas corpus applications, and civil rights claims only." *Thaddeus-X v. Blatter*, 175 F.3d 378, 391 (6th Cir. 1999) (en banc). Moreover, the underlying action must have asserted a non-frivolous claim. *Lewis*, 518 U.S. at 353; *accord Hadix v. Johnson*, 182 F.3d 400, 405 (6th Cir. 1999) (*Lewis* changed actual injury to include requirement that action be non-frivolous).

In addition, the Supreme Court squarely has held that "the underlying cause of action . . . is an element that must be described in the complaint, just as much as allegations must describe the official acts frustrating the litigation." *Christopher v. Harbury*, 536 U.S. 403, 415 (2002) (citing *Lewis*, 518 U.S. at 353 & n.3). "Like any other element of an access claim, the underlying cause of action and its lost remedy must be addressed by allegations in the complaint sufficient to give fair notice to a defendant." *Id.* at 415.

In this case, Plaintiff is protesting the denial of legal writer assistance in filing a claim regarding the denial of medical treatment for his ongoing pain. However, Plaintiff cannot show that he suffered any actual prejudice to this claim as a result of the denial of legal writer assistance. As stated above, the Court finds that Plaintiff has stated a claim under the Eighth Amendment against Defendant Lewis. Therefore, Plaintiff's First Amendment access to the courts claim is properly dismissed.

C. Respondent Superior

Plaintiff fails to make specific factual allegations against Defendant Dums, who appears to have been named as a defendant merely because he was the Acting Assistant Deputy Warden at AMF during the pertinent time period. Government officials may not be held liable for the unconstitutional conduct of their subordinates under a theory of respondeat superior or vicarious liability. Iabal, 556 U.S. at 676; Monell v. New York City Dep't of Soc. Servs., 436 U.S. 658, 691(1978); Everson v. Leis, 556 F.3d 484, 495 (6th Cir. 2009). A claimed constitutional violation must be based upon active unconstitutional behavior. Grinter v. Knight, 532 F.3d 567, 575–76 (6th Cir. 2008); Greene v. Barber, 310 F.3d 889, 899 (6th Cir. 2002). The acts of one's subordinates are not enough, nor can supervisory liability be based upon the mere failure to act. Grinter, 532 F.3d at 576; Greene, 310 F.3d at 899; Summers v. Leis, 368 F.3d 881, 888 (6th Cir. 2004). Moreover, § 1983 liability may not be imposed simply because a supervisor denied an administrative grievance or failed to act based upon information contained in a grievance. See Shehee v. Luttrell, 199 F.3d 295, 300 (6th Cir. 1999). "[A] plaintiff must plead that each Government-official defendant, through the official's own individual actions, has violated the Constitution." Igbal, 556 U.S. at 676. Plaintiff has failed to allege that Defendant Dums engaged in any active unconstitutional behavior. Accordingly, he fails to state a claim against Defendant Dums.

III. Request for preliminary injunctive relief

In Plaintiff's complaint, he requests a preliminary injunction requiring Defendant Lewis to provide him with immediate treatment for his medical condition. Preliminary injunctions are "one of the most drastic tools in the arsenal of judicial remedies." *Bonnell v. Lorenzo*, 241 F.3d 800, 808 (6th Cir. 2001) (quoting *Hanson Trust PLC v. ML SCM Acquisition Inc.*, 781 F.2d 264, 273 (2d Cir. 1986)). The issuance of preliminary injunctive relief is committed to the discretion of the

district court. See Ne. Ohio Coal. v. Blackwell, 467 F.3d 999, 1009 (6th Cir. 2006); Nader v. Blackwell, 230 F.3d 833, 834 (6th Cir. 2000). In exercising that discretion, a court must consider whether plaintiff has established the following elements: (1) a strong or substantial likelihood of success on the merits; (2) the likelihood of irreparable injury if the preliminary injunction does not issue; (3) the absence of harm to other parties; and (4) the protection of the public interest by issuance of the injunction. Nader, 230 F.3d at 834. These factors are not prerequisites to the grant or denial of injunctive relief, but factors that must be "carefully balanced" by the district court in exercising its equitable powers. Frisch's Rest., Inc. v. Shoney's, Inc., 759 F.2d 1261, 1263 (6th Cir. 1985); see also S. Galzer's Distribs. of Ohio, LLC v. Great Lakes Brewing Co., 860 F.3d 844, 849 (6th Cir. 2017) ("[T]hese are factors to be balanced, not prerequisites to be met."); Nat'l Viatical, Inc. v. Universal Settlements Int'l, Inc., 716 F.3d 952, 956 (6th Cir. 2013) (same); Ne. Ohio Coal., 467 F.3d at 1009 (same); Nader, 230 F.3d at 834 (same). "But even the strongest showing on the other three factors cannot 'eliminate the irreparable harm requirement." D.T. v. Sumner Cnty. Sch., 942 F.3d 324, 326–27 (6th Cir. 2019) (quoting Friendship Materials, Inc. v. Mich. Brick, Inc., 679 F.2d 100, 105 (6th Cir. 1982)). Moreover, where a prison inmate seeks an order enjoining state prison officials, the court is required to proceed with the utmost care and must recognize the unique nature of the prison setting. See Glover v. Johnson, 855 F.2d 277, 286 (6th Cir. 1988); Kendrick v. Bland, 740 F.2d 432, 438 & n.3 (6th Cir. 1984). The party seeking injunctive relief bears a heavy burden of establishing that the extraordinary and drastic remedy sought is appropriate under the circumstances. See Overstreet v. Lexington-Fayette Urban Cnty. Gov't, 305 F.3d 566, 573 (6th Cir. 2002); Stenberg v. Cheker Oil Co., 573 F.2d 921, 925 (6th Cir. 1978). Preliminary injunctions are not favored, and a movant is not necessarily entitled to such

relief, even if the movant has shown likelihood of success on the merits. *Benisek v. Lamone*, 138 S. Ct. 1942, 1943-44 (2018).

Under controlling Sixth Circuit authority, Plaintiff's "initial burden" in demonstrating entitlement to preliminary injunctive relief is a showing of a strong or substantial likelihood of success on the merits of his section 1983 action. *NAACP v. Mansfield*, 866 F.2d 162, 167 (6th Cir. 1989). Plaintiff has not made such a showing. As noted above, Plaintiff's complaint is largely conclusory. It is not at all clear from Plaintiff's *pro se* complaint that Plaintiff has a substantial likelihood of success on his Eighth Amendment claim. Although the Court makes no final determination on this issue, it appears at this preliminary stage that Plaintiff has not made a substantial showing of a violation of any of his constitutional rights.

Second, the presence of irreparable harm is not evident. A plaintiff's harm from the denial of a preliminary injunction is irreparable only if it is not fully compensable by monetary damages. *See Overstreet*, 305 F.3d at 578; *see also D.T. et al. v. Sumner Cnty. Sch.*, 942 F.3d 324, 326 (6th Cir. 2019) (holding that, absent a showing of irreparable harm, a preliminary injunction is not appropriate, regardless of the strength of the other factors). While Plaintiff states that he requires immediate treatment for his symptoms, his allegations regarding his alleged pain are largely conclusory. Moreover, Plaintiff does not allege facts showing that he is not being seen and examined for his complaints, or that he is currently being denied continued monitoring of his condition. Therefore, there is a continuing possibility that Plaintiff will receive treatment at any point should Defendant Lewis deem it necessary based on her medical judgment.

Finally, the interests of identifiable third parties and the public at large weigh against an injunction. [S]eparation of powers and federalism strongly discourage the federal courts from entangling themselves in the administration of state prison health care systems. *Rhinehart v. Scutt*,

Case 2:23-cv-00218-HYJ-MV ECF No. 5, PageID.40 Filed 12/05/23 Page 13 of 13

509 F. App'x 510, 516 (6th Cir. 2013) (citing Turner v. Safley, 482 U.S. 78, 84–85 (1987); Bell v.

Wolfish, 441 U.S. 520, 544 (1979); Preiser v. Rodriguez, 411 U.S. 475, 491–92 (1973)).

Accordingly, Plaintiff's request for preliminary relief will be denied.

Conclusion

Plaintiff's request for a preliminary injunction will be denied. Further, having conducted

the review required by the Prison Litigation Reform Act, the Court determines that Defendants

Dums and Unknown Part(y)(ies) will be dismissed for failure to state a claim, under 28 U.S.C.

§§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A(b), and 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). Plaintiff's Eighth Amendment claim

against Defendant Lewis will remain in the case. The Court will serve the complaint against Lewis.

An order consistent with this opinion will be entered.

Dated: December 5, 2023

/s/ Hala Y. Jarbou

HALA Y. JARBOU

CHIEF UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE

13